

**Early-learning schools create an environment to address the whole person**

KATIE ROOK

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A handful of 2-year-olds this month began their school experience playing on an expansive wood deck nestled among the treetops of the Don River ravine.

They are students at Bayview Glen School, one of the Toronto private schools catering to the under-3-year-old set.

Access to outdoor facilities is one of the considerations for parents looking to schools to equip their children at the earliest stages of life with a competitive edge for a quickly changing world.

Elaine Danson, an education consultant who guides families in the school selection process, says parents are increasingly keen to ensure that their children cultivate a diverse mix of academic and technical skills, while also building good character.

“I hear families feeling fearful,” she says.

“Things are not the same as they were when many parents were in school.

“Parents are wondering: ‘How do we put our child where they can learn to think, be strong, have character, speak well, write well, where do we give them those advantages?’ It’s not always clear.”

For many, the private system is a favourable option, though there is much to consider in distinguishing one from the next.

Bayview Glen built its reputation first as a preschool more than 50 years ago, before expanding to become an elementary and secondary school.

Corina Gill, assistant head of the lower school, points to the school’s long tradition of shepherding young children through their first years of learning as a factor that drew her there.

Ms. Gill taught preschool in Argentina prior to completing a degree at McGill University in Montreal. Motherhood, as well as a job as head of a primary school in Buenos Aires and later Uruguay, preceded her return to Canada.

She has been at Bayview Glen for more than eight years.

“I always believe in creating a school you would like for your child,” she says. “Bayview Glen is about the whole child. When children feel successful, they feel ready for anything.”

The school’s administration pays close attention to the makeup of each class, she says, taking into consideration each child’s birth month and family environment, including birth order. “There is a tremendous amount of attention paid to creating this environment.”

Connecting with each preschool student’s family is essential to the school’s dynamic, Ms. Gill says. Each child goes home daily with a communication book outlining sleep patterns, food consumed and even bathroom habits.

If a morning drop-off was fraught, Bayview Glen teachers call parents to let them know their child has stopped crying, she said.

After school, children can participate in Bayview Glen’s programs that include ballet, jazz, Mandarin and French lessons.

## **Montessori schools**

An increasingly popular choice for parents of young children is the Montessori pedagogical system.

The educational philosophy developed by Maria Montessori in the early twentieth century boasts schools all over the world, including Liberty Preparatory School in Toronto’s east end.

Erin Kerr, who co-founded Liberty Prep, says Montessori teacher training was virtually her first stop after getting off the plane from South Korea, where she had spent two years teaching.

“I was always interested in the idea of freedom within limits,” she says.

“After teaching in Korea, I decided I was going to make a real go of it and get a degree from Montessori teacher’s college.”

Ms. Kerr and her teacher-training classmate Leslie Shuber – herself a former Montessori pupil and later the parent of Montessori students – reconnected after a few years of teaching and founded Liberty Prep together. Such is the demand for

Montessori education in the city: Within three months of opening, enrollment was at capacity.

The Montessori tradition focuses on five areas: practical life, sensorial, language, arithmetic and culture. Each child is allowed the freedom to choose their daily activities, as well as move around the learning space.

Teachers are always nearby to observe, guide and challenge students' skill development. It is an active form of learning.

"The prime objective of the teacher is to be an observer," Ms. Shuber says. "It's a 'help me help myself' philosophy."

Demand for Liberty Prep's toddler class and Casa program – a three-year range combining preschool, junior and senior kindergarten – has prompted Ms. Kerr and Ms. Shuber to open a second location in January, 2016.

### **Waldorf option**

The details that create an environment conducive to learning are also closely considered by Waldorf school administrators.

Waldorf schools, such as Toronto's Waldorf Academy, emphasize a teaching style that aims to bring out each student's full capacity. Each school day begins with outdoor play and includes song-based learning and storytelling. Attention is paid to cultivating a warm, home-like environment, such as serving homemade bread and soup.

Katherine Fulford, a Waldorf teacher with more than nine years' experience, was drawn to the Waldorf school system's holistic approach.

"I was seeking programs that address all aspects of the human being. I was wondering how do we create change in the world?" she said.

"I was looking for a system ... where physical was as important as cognitive development."

At the beginning of each school year, Ms. Fulford anticipates some nervousness among preschool students. To manage their fear, Waldorf Academy teachers connect with families before the first day, sometimes visiting their homes.

"We slowly introduce them to the environment and anchor the primary relationship with the teacher," she said.

"I usually give a six-week period where my whole focus is making sure I am bonded, that they know they can trust me, that they can come to me, that they know I can support them."

“We’re always trying to see the child in their greatest aspect, their highest qualities.

“They’re so open and receptive in the early years, they reveal who they are.”