

## Perhaps you wondered ...

... how we handle individual differences in the classroom.

Despite parents' hopes and best intentions, and counter to portrayals in the media, most of our children are NOT "*practically perfect in every way*". Even children whose conference reports have a ✓ for every item probably needed more support to develop some of those skills than other children. Realistically, educators expect that **every child comes to school with a profile of strengths and weaknesses**, including some with more dramatic highs and lows than others. In other words, some of our new 3's start school with a set of skills across all domains that are roughly average for their age (some a little higher and some a little lower), but one child may already be reading (i.e., well ahead of peers) while physically unable to sit still for more than one minute of circle time (while most are ready for 10). A 4-year-old child's insightfulness may make her extremely sensitive to others, but her impulsivity still prevents her from resisting the temptation to grab or hit. Another may create advanced representational drawings and copy letters and numbers flawlessly but be unable to remember the names of those symbols or of the teachers and children in the room. A kindergartner may be able to type on the computer and play chess skillfully, but he will lash out in frustration because he cannot write his name or open his lunchbox. Another may be able to read and discuss complex stories but throw temper tantrums when she cannot handle the emotions involved in not getting her way with friends.



Research has revealed that, while experiences in the home may explain some of this variability, much of the profile is rooted in genetics. Brain wiring related to temperament, sensory processing, attention and memory, motor control, etc. yields predispositions for learning certain skills more easily than others, especially in early childhood. Therefore, we waste little time assigning credit for children's strengths or blame for their weaknesses and focus our attention on **helping each child function and flourish in the classroom**, while also ensuring that the group interacts safely and progresses well.

Our educators utilize a range of teaching and classroom management strategies. They carefully organize a learning environment with diverse materials based on age expectations and then adapt to provide more challenging options for children who demonstrate advanced proficiencies or more scaffolding for those who struggle. Our behavior expectations are clear and consistent across the school, but we creatively respond to individual needs for more movement, more structured or more flexible seating options, etc. as needed. When talking with children about these accommodations, we emphasize that everyone is working on learning something but that we're not always learning the same things in the same way. From our point of view, what's "fair" is not always what's "equal". For us, what's fair is doing our best to provide for each child what he or she needs in order to progress.

Sometimes, we recommend that children receive additional therapy outside of school from professionals trained to meet particular needs (e.g., physical, occupational, speech or cognitive behavioral therapy). Other times, children benefit from therapists collaborating with educators in the school setting. What's clear is that the **best interventions are early, specifically tailored** to the individual child, and consistently implemented by therapists, educators, and families with the support of the learning community so that we have the best chance of making progress while the brain is still in its formative years. For all children, the early years are foundational for learning, so we communicate and collaborate with families to make them as positive and productive as possible.