

GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE



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First day at kindergaten

Advice for children and parents on this big day

Learning at kindergarten

Exactly what and how much pupils should study

Soft skills

How schools are preparing students for the future

■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

EDITOR'S NOTE



Art class at the Kellett School. Photo: Handout

LAYING STRONG FOUNDATIONS

It's normally about this time of year that the *South China Morning Post* hosts its annual Kindergarten Festival. Sadly, the Omicron surge has put paid to that. However, the show must go on, and now is exactly the time when parents need to start thinking about which kindergarten is right for their child so they can apply later in the year.

To that end, we have a special kindergarten section in this issue of the *Good Schools Guide*. Appropriately enough, the first story (page four) starts on day one with those first day nerves. The first day at school is a milestone in everyone's life and it can cause anxiety in kids and parents alike. We look at how those nerves can be alleviated, making the day one to remember.

What exactly should young children be learning at kindergarten, though? That is the subject of our second story. There are differing schools of thought on this subject. Is it best to lay a solid academic foundation for children at a young age, or is it better for their development that they play while they still can? We look at both sides of the argument, starting on page six.

And for all the talk of learning, what about physical activity? These days it can be harder than ever to get away from screens of various ilk. We hear about the benefits of physical activity on page 10 and how you can encourage your kids to get active.

Older students are not forgotten in this issue, though. On page 16 we hear about how parents can keep an eye on their children's mental health during this current strictest of lockdowns, what international schools are doing to promote soft skills these days (page 20), and how art classes can be just as valuable as maths and the sciences (page 22).

Douglas Parkes
Editor

SPECIAL REPORT

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PARTNERING WITH PARENTS

While the last few years have presented a wide range of challenges to the way in which schools in the region operate, they have also presented an incredible range of opportunities for those brave enough to embrace them.

“Given the immense pressure that school closures have placed upon families, we committed early on to maximise the positive impact of any arising opportunities. And the heightened involvement of parents in the successful delivery of learning experiences means that they have never been better positioned to guide, advise and support schools and school leaders as they navigate the many unique challenges of successful operation.” Mr Ben Keeling, Principal, Shrewsbury International School Hong Kong

Coming as a result of extensive consultation, Shrewsbury launched an ambitious new strategic plan entitled Together We Flourish amidst a global pandemic in August 2021. Designed to support development as a centre of excellence over the course of ten years, it acts as a celebration of connectedness and community.

“We found the process of engagement immensely rewarding. Outcomes have strengthened, sharpened and refined our thinking - they have enabled us to better rationalise decisions, and improve student outcomes.” Mr Ben Keeling, Principal, Shrewsbury International School Hong Kong

The development of an online learning programme stands as one example of the now institutionalised commitment to partnership on exhibition at Shrewsbury. Informed by the experiences of students, parents and staff, the schedule available promotes regular social contact and small group interaction, while safeguarding the experiences of the many families who require a flexible and adaptable programme of study, supportive of engagement on demand. Described by parents as “varied and engaging”, “brilliantly accessible” and “beautifully evolved”, the programme has been designed to take advantage of the many critical differences between learning at home and learning online. The balance of the programme continues to be shaped by shared experience and remains continually under review.

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Nursery parent



THE RELATIONSHIPS WE SHARE TRULY DEFINE US



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FIRST DAY BLUES

GETTING READY FOR THE FIRST DAY IN KINDERGARTEN

Both parents and children can have mixed emotions of excitement and nervousness, but early preparation can help make the big day one to remember, writes **Douglas Parkes**



The first day of kindergarten is a momentous occasion. For a young child, it represents a new stage in their life, outside home and away from mum and dad. For some, starting school is an exciting experience, full of new and wonderful possibilities. To other children it can appear scary, full of unknowns they are not yet equipped to understand and process. Similar thoughts and feelings are not just confined to the kids, either. Parents often have their own mixed emotions. Swelling pride sits beside sadness and apprehension when they wave goodbye on their child's first day at school.

"First days are always hard, even for us as adults," agrees Fairchild Kindergarten School principal Betty Yau, who goes on to say that, for children, the biggest anxiety on the first day of school will be separation from their

main carer, in most cases the parents, or their helper.

"There is also the lack of familiarity with the school environment, and with the new teachers in the class," she adds.

As well as the unfamiliarity of new people and places, communication can be a stressor in the beginning of school life. The relationship between a child and parent is often so strong and established that sometimes a child does not have to speak in order for a parent to know how they feel or what they want. "But with a new adult [teacher] this bond may not have been established yet – and this could cause the child to feel anxious if not handled carefully," explains Ruth Hanson, head of early years at Nord Anglia International School (NAIS) Hong Kong. "Also, a child may have worries around the setting

and being able to know and understand the environment. Where is everything, the routines, knowing the other children, the unspoken rules – all of these are new and therefore need to be considered carefully for each child."

To ease these nerves, Yau suggests parents do a form of "soft marketing" ahead of the first day at school by explaining to their child that they will be joining a new school and meeting new friends, where there will be many new things to explore.

As part of this process, an early visit to the chosen kindergarten can be invaluable. Yau recommends the family visit the school together – whether for an open house, a school tour or trial lesson – as this lets the child become familiar with the space and get excited about going to school.

Both children and parents are likely to experience separation anxiety.

Photo: Fairchild Kindergarten

■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

Bridging the distance between school and home in some way, if possible, is another piece of advice. “During your visit, take photos of the classroom and the school spaces, and class teacher if this is allowed,” advises Yau. “This provides the chance to bring school into a conversation at home and helps to emotionally prepare your child.”

Role-playing at home can help too, says Yau. Before school starts, try on the school uniform at home, pack your child’s school bag together and talk about what’s in the bag – items such as a water bottle and change of clothes – as this can help build a routine for the future and settle your child for when it comes to the real thing.

Of course, each pupil is an individual and, ahead of the big day, parents should consider their child’s emotional development. How do they cope with change or frustration? What about their social skills – how well do they respond to others, are they used to being involved in small groups? What is their level of independence – can they go to the toilet alone or feed themselves? And finally, their language development – how do they communicate their needs or ask for support or help?

“Each child will be at a different stage in their development of the above and as parents we can support our children in these areas,” says Nord Anglia’s Hanson. “We can reassure them about the up-and-coming change, we can take them to play spaces where they will play alongside other children, we can give them phrases and words to greet others and ask for help, and we support them in their growing independence by gradually developing their self-help skills.

“Don’t panic – share with your kindergarten how your child manages with these and remember, a



New pupils at Nord Anglia International School enjoy a weeklong settling period. Photo: Handout



Kindergarten is a time to grow accustomed to and become comfortable with classroom learning, not develop a lifelong aversion to it



Making new friends at Fairchild Kindergarten. Photo: Handout

kindergarten’s role is to care and teach your child, in partnership with you. So, even if your child struggles with any of the above, a good kindergarten will understand that their role is to continue to develop these areas with your child.”

Both Fairchild and NAIS take proactive steps to ensure their youngest pupils are eased into school life.

At the latter, each child has a settling period that can last up to a week, “which supports them and gradually builds up to the moment when a child can happily separate from their parents/carer for the full kindergarten session” says Hanson. Before that separation, teachers get to know both parent and child, and “stay and play” dates are arranged when parents or carer and child come to their new kindergarten for playtime. Here there is no separation time, just lots of playing and getting to know teachers, classmates and the new environment.

“During this settling time, and over the coming weeks, we focus on establishing a ‘sense of place’ for each child, so they understand the environment and know where key spaces are and how routines work,” explains Hanson.

“We also focus on developing a ‘sense of belonging’ for each child, so they feel safe and connected to the adults and other children in the setting. And finally, we focus on each child’s ‘sense of ownership’, so they begin to know that this is their kindergarten and they happily and confidently understand how they can play, learn, move and belong in their kindergarten.”

Similarly, Fairchild work closely with parents to ensure as smooth a transition as possible. The school shares photos and biographies of its teachers ahead of the first day along with a welcome letter which contains the class schedule so parents can talk to their child about what to expect before they arrive.

Communication with parents is crucial. Teachers meet parents and child as they arrive at school and keep in touch with parents by calling them and letting them know how their little one is settling in. Fairchild uses the Storypark app to share photos with the family too. The school also prepares a learning story showing parents videos and photos of their child in action, as well as twice weekly highlights from class. “In this way, we work in tandem with parents,” says Yau.

Parents themselves are not immune from anxiety either. Henrik Hoeg, managing director at the Jadis Blurton Family Development Center, cautions that parents need to be aware of the behaviour and emotions they model in front of their young ones at this crucial juncture.

“If you are the parent that waits anxiously as the school bus fades into the distance, visibly upset, your child is likely to mirror that too. There is nothing wrong with feeling a bit teary-eyed sending your child off to school, but be aware that you may be communicating that leaving is scary and negative. Your child won’t necessarily understand the complexity of the emotions involved for you; they simply see your distress as they are disappearing around a corner with a bus full of strangers.”

Hoeg says this awareness should extend to after school as well. You may be tempted to grill your child on every minute detail of their day, but don’t go too far with your interrogation. Be aware that you might be communicating that your child’s every movement is under the microscope. If you worry incessantly about their daily learning and friendships, then so will they.

“Kindergarten is a time to grow accustomed to and become comfortable with classroom learning, not develop a lifelong aversion to it,” says Hoeg.

In fact, everyone involved is likely to be nervous. First days anywhere are like that. Hanson remembers her first day teaching and her anxieties over whether the children would like her, what their parents would think, and how she would get along with her new colleagues.

“I was so nervous but wanted desperately to do a good job,” she says. There were hiccups along the way and days when things didn’t go to plan, but Hanson admits those were the most valuable learning experiences and that thanks to the support around her, she made it safely over those bumps in the road.

“We can all get nervous when joining a new group, class or job for the first time,” she says. “Will we enjoy it? Have we made a mistake? Should I have picked a different option? It’s good to understand that with every new experience comes excitement and challenges, and both should be expected and welcomed, for that is how we learn and grow.”

■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

LEARNING FOR LIFE

SETTING A FRAMEWORK FOR KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION

A good kindergarten blurs play and academics, serving as a bridge from home or preschool education to learning in a more traditional classroom setting, writes **Pin Lee**

In Hong Kong, it is not unusual for parents to feel anxious about giving their children a head start in education, right from kindergarten. Although preschool education is not mandatory in Hong Kong, most parents enrol their children in an early-learning programme because of the city's competitive educational system and the high expectations that accompany children's preparations for formal schooling.

Getting your child into a good kindergarten is paramount, so the thinking goes, because it can lead to admission to a respected primary/junior school, and then to a competitive secondary school and, eventually, to a top university.

Although the curricula in kindergartens can vary from one institution to another, most aim for similar goals – most importantly, to serve as a smooth introduction to primary school for any child. The Hong Kong government encourages kindergartens to take the child-centred educational approach when teaching children how to be socially aware, to cultivate good habits and be curious about their surroundings.

However, what children learn during their years at kindergarten is often the centre of scrutiny. There has been criticism that some kindergartens subject kids to too much schoolwork, often with little exposure to physical education or arts, music and science.

In the more academically inclined institutions, children are also subjected to rote memorisation or taught through drill and practice, and expected to be able to do things by the time they leave preschool that some – perhaps even many – are not developmentally prepared to do.

So what are the hallmarks of a high-quality kindergarten curriculum? This begs some questions. And what should children be learning at kindergarten in the first place?

Early childhood educators say kindergartens should help form the building blocks of physical, social and emotional development in youngsters. As such, some academic learning – the basic concepts of mathematics such as counting, recognising shapes and reading time – are necessary, and so are literacy, critical thinking and honing cognitive skills.

Experts also point out that a good preschool should provide a bridge from education at home or at kindergarten level to education in a more traditional classroom setting where children must interact with a teacher and follow rules. As such, learning soft skills like self-control and how to cooperate with others will help children transition more easily into primary school.

According to Betty Yau, principal of Fairchild Kindergarten, learning numeracy and literacy are all part of early education, but equally important are the soft skills to prepare children for the modern workforce.

"In this digital age, knowledge is freely available and at the end of our fingertips, but problem-solving skills, critical thinking and collaboration are all things that need to be developed in an early-years classroom," says Yau.

She added that students at Fairchild, through being in a nurturing environment and supported by mindful teachers, also learn to be kind, empathetic and respectful, which are all soft skills developed from a young age.

Jen Crickenberger, curriculum instruction coach and Junior Grade 1 literacy coordinator of The Harbour School, says beginning school before the age of four depends entirely on the child's readiness and family preference.



Students at Fairchild Kindergarten are instilled with empathy from an early age.
Photo: Handout

"I believe that drilling facts into such a young child can cause burnout and a dislike for school. A high-quality kindergarten programme that is well-versed in what is developmentally appropriate for children as young as two will emphasise play in a print-rich environment," says Crickenberger.

Geoff Heney, lower primary principal of Hong Kong International School (HKIS), states, "Kindergarten can be the foundation for all learning in a child's educational career. Of course, basic maths and literacy skills are built in kindergarten. At this age, students should be given the

opportunity to learn what numbers, shapes and measurements mean. It is a time to build their conceptual understanding and comprehension skills for primary school."

But Heney also stresses that a good kindergarten will also help students to learn how to develop healthy relationships and start to build friendships. He says teaching children to be independent is another aspect of preschool.

"It becomes a place where students begin to organise themselves and learn many self-help skills and tasks on



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**Photos were taken before the Covid-19 outbreak.*

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Children have been found to master skills far faster through play than traditional learning. Photo: Handout

their own or with teacher-guided practices. Through a language-rich environment where students are questioned, encouraged to share ideas and thoughts, and solve authentic problems – they are building strong language and cognitive skills which assist in effective collaboration, academic achievement and successful relationships,” says Heney.

“Kindergarten builds on the idea of encouraging students to be curious. We want them to explore their passions and ask questions in order for the learning to become authentic and meaningful to them.”

Faced with criticism that some kindergartens have become too focused on academics, educators say teaching through play is a better approach since this is a proven way for students to learn both academic and non-academic skills.

Yau says Fairchild is in complete agreement that it is through play that children learn most effectively.

“Brain development in the first six years is immensely important to support the connections children make,” she states.

“That is how they can make sense of everything around them, understanding their place in the world. Play-based learning in a nurturing school setting best supports the development of brain connections, and the most efficient way for young children to learn is through joyful, active and engaging hands-on experiences.

“Through play, children can master skills through 20-30 repetitions, rather than over a 100 in traditional learning modes. Children at play are at work, figuring out their own theories such as how a stone can sink in water, or why does the turtle swim in shallow water.

“Using real-life ideas, they can discover answers by themselves, rather than be spoon-fed the answers. Through this process of active learning, children can be much more creative and innovative, and we believe this is how they learn best,” adds Yau.

Fairchild Kindergarten, according to Yau, subscribes to the Reggio Emilia method of teaching whereby children learn through their individual interests.

“We are one of the few Reggio Emilia-inspired schools in Hong Kong where we honour a strong image of the child as competent individuals. Our teachers plan many projects in the classroom to create a happy, engaged and rich environment where no two days are the same but every day is fun, exciting and productive. When children do not want to leave school at the end of the day, we know they’ve had a great day,” adds Yau.

“We follow the interests of children, rather than follow a fixed schedule of learning. This makes the learning more interesting for the children, and they are therefore more engaged by having more ownership of the content of their learning. Children thereby become active learners. They do not need teachers to ‘teach’, they just need teachers to support and guide their questions.”

To enhance the learning experience for youngsters, Yau says Fairchild introduces many natural elements such as sand, water, shells, plants and insects, into the classroom. This, she says, will also teach kids from an early age about social responsibility and love for Mother Earth.

“Having natural living things in school helps children learn to look after the insects or animals, learn about their body parts, the life cycle, what they eat, and helps develop their empathy, understanding and awareness of sustainability. Children then learn to appreciate relationships in the world and how the natural world impacts them and others,” says Yau.

The Harbour School adopts the US Common Code Standards when teaching mathematics and literacy, and takes an integrated approach to teach science and social studies.

“Developmental skills such as social skills, taking turns, showing responsibility and an emphasis on kindness are interwoven within the school day, whether it is when children are reading a levelled text in a small guided reading group or pretending to be a shopkeeper selling apples or sushi in our structured play space,” says Crickenberger.

The Harbour School also advocates teaching through play. Citing the 2009 report by the National Association

The Harbour School takes an integrated approach to science and social studies.
Photo: Handout



“Children at play are at work, figuring out their own theories such as how a stone can sink in water, or why does the turtle swim in shallow water

for the Education of Young Children, Crickenberger says play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition and social competence.

The report says play gives children opportunities to develop physical competence and enjoyment of the outdoors, understand and make sense of their world, interact with others, express and control emotions, develop their symbolic and problem-solving abilities, and practise emerging skills.

“Our students play throughout the day, from independent exploration of ‘maths tubs’ filled with pattern blocks, teddy bear counters and playing in a structured play space to hula hooping outdoors during recess,” adds Crickenberger.

“Whether online or on campus, our kindergarten programme offers a hands-on US curriculum that is tailored to the needs and strengths of each student.”

Heney says teachers at HKIS adopt an inquiry-based approach when teaching youngsters. Students will be encouraged to ask questions or teachers begin a lesson with a question. This will spark curiosity and students can then explore and build upon that teaching point.

“What is important to note is that we teach our core subjects in a manner where students feel a strong connection to what it is they are learning. We want students to feel like they are a reader, an author, a scientist, a mathematician

“Building a learning identity for each child is of the utmost importance. It is important to recognise that each child brings their own unique gifts to a school and we believe in celebrating that,” says Heney. “In addition, that belief in themselves sets them up for success as they go through school.”



Teachers use music and singing to engage children and support their auditory skills and language development from a young age.



Engaging with children at eye level, helps to strengthen relationships and ensure children feel valued and respected within the lending environment.

When it comes to instilling personal values and skills that will lead to later successes in life, a positive early childhood education cannot be underestimated, experts say.

Implementing Core Values From The Start at YCIS

During these formative years from zero to six years old is when rapid neurological development happens in children. As such, a holistic learning environment is proven to help young learners begin to develop a sense of self, learn to build authentic, trustworthy and respectful relationships, as well as discover the world around them.

For these reasons, Yew Chung International School (YCIS) places incredible value into making sure that they are helping children to build a solid foundation of values and skills that they can take with them throughout their lifelong learning and personal journeys.

With a rich history of almost 90 years providing quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Hong Kong, the school prides itself in two areas: being a forerunner of play-based learning in Hong Kong, as well as its dedication to uphold its "12 Values" through the Yew Chung Approach.

According to Amy-Leigh Hood, Assistant Co-Principal of the ECE section: "Our approach to learning is unique and has shown over time to be successful".

The school follows a Chinese and English bilingual programme for all years. The Infant and Toddler Learning Programme (ITLP) and the Kindergarten Programme is guided by the developmental outcomes of the Early Years Foundation Stage of the National Curriculum of England. In line with this curriculum is an emphasis on the motto: 'Development Matters' with focus areas placed on seven domains. These include physical development, understanding the world, expressive arts and design, personal, social and emotional development as well as Mathematics and Literacy.



Teachers engage in learning alongside children in both English and Chinese, challenging their thinking and supporting their developing skills.



Collaboration with others is an important part of learning and development in an Early Years context.

Underscoring this curriculum is a further emphasis on four principles which assert that: every child is unique and is a competent learner; children are engaged in building positive and trustworthy relationships; the environment in which children learn in plays a key role in their development and learning and that children develop a global perspective through the multicultural and multilingual focus.

Beyond these four principles, what else makes the school's early years programme stand out are its 12 Values which form the Yew Chung Approach. This was developed over a period of time by research done by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Some of the 12 Values of the Yew Cheung Approach include: children are worthy of our respect and admiration; children are capable and can be trusted, members of the teaching team work together as equals, and teachers and children construct learning together.

While all values are equally important and foundational to the work that the school does, Hood highlights a few to illustrate how the school embeds them into its curriculum.

"Firstly 'Value 1: Children are Worthy of our Respect and Admiration' really frames all the work that we do, reminding us of the reason our work with young children is so important," she said.

Every child is respected as a unique individual, and teachers and leaders are focused on creating opportunities and developing ways that enrich and deepen their individual strengths as well as support areas for growth.

Another value that Hood talked about was 'Value 4: Strong Relationships Must Be Developed Between Teachers and Children'. She



Children's curiosity and investigation is encouraged as they explore their ideas through play opportunities.

explained that children learn in the most authentic way when they know that they are safe and secure. This is how trustworthy relationships with those who care for them are formed. This is also why there is such an intentional focus on building relationships and trust between student and teachers, further extending this to the parent community as well.

Another value is 'Value 9: Children are Supported in the Use of their Home Language'.

"We are intentional about celebrating and supporting children in the development of their home language, as well as supporting them in becoming multilingual learners," Hood said. As a bilingual school, a key tenet is a belief that children can flourish and best express themselves in the language that they naturally think and process information in. Hood explained that this is in fact powerful in aiding the acquisition of knowledge and other languages.

As a school, YCIS is proud of its 12 Values within the Yew Chung Approach and many believe it is what makes them stand out further lending to its success.

"Our 12 values are intertwined into everything we do as a school. They are instilled in the work we do within YCIS and are referred to in discussions, reflections, planning and learning," Hood said.

She adds that "the two values that really underscore everything is the way that we view children and our perspective on how, valued, admired, trusted, and respected children are as individuals," she said. "All the work we do with children and families is based on our image of the child and how important their learning, growth and development is to us."

So even given the current online learning during COVID, YCIS has never wavered on its dedication towards creating interactive, engaging and stimulating online sessions. As in the classroom, children's interests, ideas and individual queries continue to be a strong focus as well as the support offered to families through workshops, connection or resource boxes sent home. This is all constructed through well thought out reflective discussions amongst the teachers and leaders in thought to create an off-campus online learning experience that fully honours the Yew Chung way.

"We are determined to provide children within our ECE with the best learning experience, whether we are online or face-to-face on our campus," Hood said.

■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

FITNESS AND WELL-BEING

GETTING PHYSICAL AS PART OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Parents can make sure their children get enough exercise outside class with virtual play dates, make-believe games and even helping out with household chores, writes **Ben Young**



Teachers at Fairchild Kindergarten have found ways to bring creative physical play to Zoom. Photo: Handout

Pandemic-era regulations and online learning have been extremely challenging for kindergarten pupils, teachers and parents. This is because physical activity and play are difficult for teachers to set up remotely, and Covid-19 restrictions make it harder for parents to arrange things like outdoor play dates.

Fortunately, several of Hong Kong's top early childhood education experts have been working tirelessly to ensure pupils stay physically active and continue their learning unabated during this challenging period.

"Our kindergarten teachers are inspirational," says Geoff Lacey, principal of Hong Kong International School (HKIS) Lower Primary.

"They continue to make learning fun online and ensure that pupils are actively involved in their learning. Moving to online, one could easily make lessons passive, more of a give and get. However, our teachers encourage collaboration online by class shares and breakout sessions where children have the opportunity to reflect and articulate their thoughts and ideas."

Lessons at HKIS often include activities like Lego building and watercolour painting, which keep pupils moving while also tapping into their imagination and creativity, while segments of other lessons are dedicated

to physical education. In addition to regularly scheduled PE activities, HKIS has daily "move and groove" sessions in which different teachers will dance, play, do yoga and move about with pupils in ways that will challenge their strength, flexibility and aerobic capacity.

Lacey says that parents should play an integral role in helping their children stay focused during Zoom classes and ensuring that the children are getting enough exercise outside class.

"Parents should be engaging pupils in physical activity throughout the day whenever possible," he explains. "When accessible, going out for walks is ideal for children to get some fresh air. At home, children and parents can set up mini obstacle courses for the whole family to get involved with. Also, it is important that when not online for classes, pupils are not on screens during breaks."

Parent-teacher communication is more important than ever, and HKIS staff have been organising coffee meetings to help parents understand what online learning looks like and how they might be able to support their child at home.

"We try to provide them with a variety of resources to help support pupils' social and emotional needs as we

find pupils have more challenges with emotional regulation when engaged in home learning," Lacey says.

Staff and parents ought to work closely in organising physical play during lessons which, according to HKIS Lower Primary Kindergarten teacher Priyanka D'Costa, plays an "even more critical role in online learning" as it fulfils an important socialisation role. If a child does not have frequent play dates, it becomes more important for him/her to get used to socialising with friends during online play.

"Play looks different online and can look different from day to day," D'Costa explains. "In my class, sometimes play includes scavenger hunt games like 'look for a shoe that is not yours' to share a laugh or teach maths concepts like 'find something short or long.' Sometimes when we have had a busy day, it looks like making dragonflies or octopuses with Blu Tack while talking and sharing random anecdotes or knowledge with each other."

"Through play, pupils strengthen their fine motor muscles, sometimes create letters and numbers, or just get creative and talk."

Physical play is also an important point of emphasis at English Schools Foundation (ESF) Tung Chung

Learning multiple languages from a young age has its clear benefits. From increasing brain power to being culturally more aware, educational experts advocate bilingualism as a way to advance students' overall academic career and personal development.



Choosing French As A Way To Open Doors



This is one of the many reasons why Hong Kong's very own French International School (FIS) has been a popular choice for parents who wish to give their children an exposure to both French and English.

"Learning a foreign language from an early age has many advantages. It promotes the development of greater focus and a better working memory. In addition, there is increased mental flexibility, greater reasoning capacity and faster processing of information, and this is not an exhaustive list!" said Mrs Meriem Belhadj, Director of Primary Campuses and Studies at the French International School of Hong Kong.

Added to this, Mrs Belhadj said that bilingualism develops a "metalinguistic awareness" in children, which not only promotes a deeper understanding of a child's mother tongue, but it also helps in acquiring additional languages. And finally, a bilingual education also helps to develop intercultural skills, which translates to a better understanding of other cultures which ultimately promotes self-fulfilment, curiosity, openness to the world and the ability to learn. All of these have been proven to help pupils develop skills that later contribute to their future career successes.

At FIS, English and French as a bilingual programme is offered through its French stream from an early age. Its kindergarten programme has always been highly sought after by both native and non-native French speakers. And there are other reasons aside from its bilingual offering.

Kindergarten in the French Education system starts at the age of three, and it is often seen as one of its greatest assets. In 2021, an updated kindergarten curriculum was introduced by the French Ministry of Education taking into account new research in cognitive sciences, neurosciences and active pedagogy. Taking all of the new research into account, cognitive activities were developed and are now delivered in both languages at FIS in the form of concrete problems that children have to solve. This approach has shown to actively promote young children's desire to learn.

"The students will develop, particularly through play, all the skills they will need later on in order to acquire core knowledge (reading, writing, counting, respecting others). The attention paid by teachers to language, in particular is constant, and all these skills are taught in both languages," said Mrs Belhadj.

Indeed, another weapon in the school's armoury is its exemplary team of teaching staff who are experts in the field of early childhood education, who are also trained each in their own language as well as in an intercultural and plurilingual approach. By combining the latest educational research with the team's expertise and experience, the school is not only able to offer a programme that is adapted to the linguistic profile of each student, but it is also able to satisfy a young child's need for emotional security in order to develop and flourish.

"The attention paid by our teachers is constant. Our pupils evolve

in a nurturing and serene school environment which allows each child to fully develop in the learning process and to give the best of themselves," Mrs Belhadj said.

Class time is seen as an opportunity for pupils to really express an opinion or need, to ask questions, or to give his or her point of view and to take real interest in what others have to say, all the while conversing in both languages. And this is the essence of what FIS is trying to accomplish amongst its students.

"Learning to live together, the culture of autonomy and critical thinking, reflection and social and environmental commitment are an integral part of the French education system," said Ms Belhadj. "The values of humanism and tolerance transmitted to the students give them the keys to become committed citizens."

As to why choose French when living in Asia, Ms Belhadj said that choosing FIS, more specifically French as a medium of instruction, means choosing a network of French schools abroad, present on all continents. There are 550 French establishments implemented in 138 countries.

Furthermore, "learning French is for everyone," said Ms Belhadj. The language is spoken on five continents by more than 200 million people worldwide. Learning the language further makes it easier to learn other Latin based languages including Spanish, Italian and Portuguese. Added to that, Ms Belhadj emphasised that the language can really open up "a resolutely humanist culture and makes major artistic and literary trends accessible".

For these reasons, choosing FIS also means choosing a multilingual and multicultural education that is based on both academic standards and a constant concern for the development and well-being of students, she said.



■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

International Kindergarten, according to principal Allison Banbury.

“Play is central to learning; it ensures that children develop skills and knowledge through active participation,” she says. “Play provides children with the time and space to explore the concepts, theories and ideas that are of interest to them. Physical play can arise spontaneously or be planned. It can be initiated by adults or children. It can involve whole body movement – such as dancing, jumping or doing yoga, hand-eye coordination, or foot-eye coordination.”

According to Banbury, it is extremely important that children remain physically active as this “not only affects their health and well-being but also affects their cognitive growth”. Similar to HKIS’ “move and groove” session, ESF schools recently introduced “squiggle and wiggle” sessions in which teachers engage children physically as they develop reading and writing skills.

She says that physical education and play can be accommodated for during lockdowns, it just requires some additional preparation.

“Physical play needs a clear space, so ensure that toys are packed away, and depending on the type of physical play, you may have to move furniture or ensure that furniture that is around the play space is safe with no sharp corners or hard edges onto which children could fall,” Banbury explains. “Clear boundaries must be set, like what the child is wearing, can the children jump and dance on the furniture or only on the floor, and what toys will they be using?”

She also emphasises the important role parents must play in this relatively new form of early childhood education, citing “connection” as the key for parents in ensuring that preschool-aged children continue to learn.

“The close connection between parent and child ensures that parents understand their children’s feelings,



Even with classrooms unavailable, HKIS hosts regular “move and groove” sessions employing dance, play, yoga and more. Photo: Handout



Make a meal, set the table, eat and clean up together – these increase motor skills, language development, problem solving, critical thinking, not to mention increasing family interaction while supporting children’s self-care skills.



Experts recommend two hours of physical activity daily. Photo: Shutterstock

needs and wants at this time and can provide for them. Good health and well-being are central to learning,” Banbury says. “Establishing a close connection with the school, through supporting their children’s active engagement in the online and offline learning offered by their children’s kindergartens, will ensure that a child’s cognitive learning progresses.

“A kindergarten’s curriculum should continue to offer a rich variety of engagements in response to children’s interests and next steps in learning, even during periods of in-school class suspension.”

Last but not least, Banbury stressed the importance of parents ensuring their children stay connected with other children.

“Whether it be through school-initiated Zoom sessions or through virtual or, when possible, face-to-face play dates, this will allow children to continue developing key social, linguistic and communication skills which are essential for happy and healthy relationships, which parents recognise as an important part of their children’s learning at kindergarten,” she says.

Many parents have to spend more time at home with their child because of school closures and work-from-home provisions. But many experts claim that those who view this as an opportunity instead of a purely negative circumstance will be doing what’s best for themselves and their children, as there are many fun and creative ways to bond and exercise with kids that may never have occurred during normal conditions.

“Parents can definitely exercise with their children more – stretching together, yoga poses, dancing and jumping to music, obstacle courses at home, these will all help to get everyone moving together,” says Betty Yau, principal at Fairchild Kindergarten. “Even mixing something in a bowl, or ripping up paper, or scribbling on a piece of paper will get those arm muscles moving.”

Yau is another big advocate of creative physical play, both for Fairchild Zoom classes and during free time.

“It can be as simple as going for a walk with your child and playing ‘I spy’, or setting up role-playing games at home,” she says. “For example, you can save your egg cartons, ice cream containers, bottles and fruit boxes, and use these to set up a mini supermarket at home. Parents and children can pretend to come into the shop, choose what they are buying, and pack their shopping, all while

negotiating, problem solving, and moving around the house.”

Yau noted that including children in what are normally considered tedious chores is a “tremendous opportunity” both to increase quality time, and help kids develop good habits. Such activities can be considered exercise for kindergarten children, as they are still in early developmental stages.

“Use this time to involve children in day-to-day activities at home such as folding the laundry, this supports their hand-eye coordination and helps tackle a chore,” she says. “Make a meal, set the table, eat and clean up together – these increase motor skills, language development, problem solving, critical thinking, not to mention increasing family interaction while supporting children’s self-care skills.”

Finally, Odette Umali, founder at parenting consulting company Gordon Parenting, who has done extensive research on the topic of physical play, says its importance cannot be understated.

“Physical activity from an early age should be encouraged as it enhances the development of a child’s motor skills, bones and muscles, prevents obesity, and improves cognitive and social skills,” Umali says. “Exercise also improves children’s focus and energy levels.”

She says that research has found that children need a minimum of 60 minutes of structured physical activity a day and an additional 60 minutes of unstructured physical activity.

“Fortunately, there are still a lot of activities that kids can do outdoors like playing in parks, going to the beach and hiking,” Umali says. “Indoor activity can be a challenge but there are great resources and guides that are available on the web. Some notable ones we found include dance videos on YouTube, exercise-based video games like *Just Dance*, balloon volleyball, mini trampolining, jumping rope and hula hoop.”

Umali echoes Yau’s sentiment that allowing children to participate in chores is a great way to kill two birds with one stone. “Children prefer the real and real things to things on screen,” Umali says. “If you are sweeping up around the house, hand your kids a broom or vacuum and they will be happy to participate. If you are preparing food in the kitchen, let them be part of the process by washing vegetables or mixing baking ingredients.”



When it comes to developing a lifelong passion for learning, laying a solid foundation during a child's early years education is important. In fact, according to experts, a child's foray into early schooling not only determines the success of their future learning, but it can also go a long way in helping them to develop as a person.



Early-Years Matters

"The Nursery year is important because it is often the first time a child enters 'schooling', be it at a kindergarten, a childcare center or school, getting this right is vital," said Ruth Hanson, Head of Campus at Nord Anglia International Pre-School (NAIS HK).

She explained that this is the time when children move from the safety of their family structures to becoming part of another community where other adults play a role in their educational and personal development.

"It is in the Nursery Year at NAIS HK where we see children learning how to collaborate, become resilient and express themselves more effectively," she said. And aside from developing skills such as phonics, number sense, or even how to respond to other people's actions and choices, this is also the time when they begin to "discover their own sense of self and awe and wonder and develop a true love for learning that can last a lifetime", she added.

Of course, the Covid-19 pandemic has been disruptive for early learners in the past few years. Given that the Nursery year is when children typically begin to socialize with others in a school environment, the disruptions have meant less physical and social interactions, the very essence of early years learning. However, NAIS HK hasn't allowed this to stop them from fulfilling their mission.

The school has found creative ways to ensure that school and home learning can work hand-in-hand for the benefit of its students. In fact, Hanson said that their experience has shown that there are plenty of opportunities for play and socialization when physical schools are shut.

"The one thing we have learnt at NAIS HK over the last two years is that a school is far more than just a building – it is a community of people – children, teachers, and parents all sharing the same educational goals and aspirations and whose actions are intrinsically linked to support the learning and development of each and every child within that community," she said. It is because of this commitment and the support towards each other that has allowed virtual school at NAIS HK to run successfully.

The secret to its success is its commitment to its five key steps



that ensure the school creates enough linked interactions and engagement for every child.

According to Hanson, the school aims to firstly build emotional connections with their young students. By practicing and being "intentional teachers", teachers are mindful of how they use a child's name, how to gain eye contact, knowing what calms, excites and makes children laugh in order to create an emotional connection in the absence of a physical one.

Secondly, the school uses small group sessions as a way to emphasise relationships and communications, these are vital to help support a young child through their growth and learning. Utilising a blended approach that involves live class calls, pre-recorded videos, 1:1 and small group

calls, the school has found an effective way for teachers to have meaningful interactions with each child and be able to understand each child's needs and respond to those appropriately. Thirdly, the school sticks to a regular routine each week so that students can anticipate and get excited by creating what Hanson calls a "flow" and "rhythm" to their week.

Fourthly, the school ensures that learning is at the right pace and challenge for each child. And lastly, the school encourages using simple, physical resources available at home as a great way to help children engage in the virtual classroom and learn. Rather than passively watching a screen, children are encouraged to move and be active.

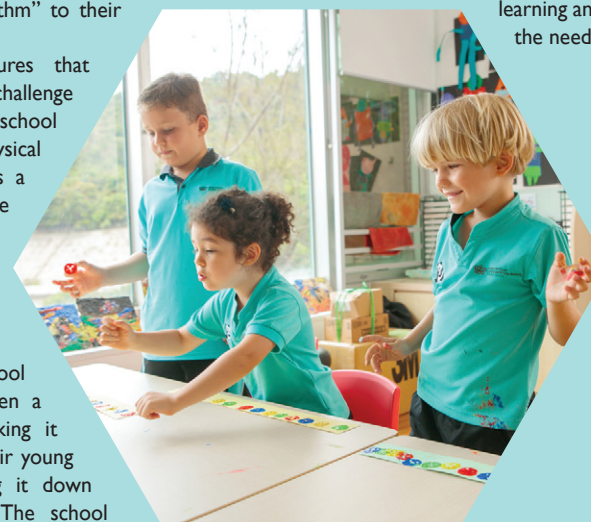
Despite ongoing school suspensions, NAIS HK has been a model for other schools, making it easy for parents to support their young children's learning by breaking it down into small manageable steps. The school

emphasises that while there are many ways to do learning, play continues to be one of the most valuable avenues of learning.

"Furthermore, we emphasize five key activities to support your child's growth and development at home," she said.

- Learning through play. This is the best way for your young child to learn. Plan in manageable playful moments and give them your undivided attention.
- Take time to talk to your children during regular routines. This is simple but so impactful.
- Read with your child. This is an effective way to develop language and understanding. Share a short story together, talking about characters and asking the question: What would happen if...?
- Making mistakes is a great way to learn. Encourage your children to "have a go".
- Follow your child's interests to ensure that they are fully engaged.

As schools carry on with virtual learning, NAIS HK is confident that it is able to continue to deliver a positive curriculum that facilitates a positive early childhood education. And Hanson credits this to the school's complete focus on three key elements of learning: Establishing an emotional connection with each student, a personalised approach to each child's learning and being organised and responsive to the needs of the students and families.



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ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

GALVANISING YOUTH VOICES TO MAKE A REAL CHANGE

The climate crisis is the biggest threat affecting every aspect of our lives, and young people are leading the fight to enact change at a grass-roots level, writes **Ben Young**

The Canadian International School Hong Kong (CDNIS) hosted the second annual Hong Kong Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Summit on March 12. In a world full of negative headlines, the 2022 SDG Summit was a breath of fresh air, and a sign that Asia's youth is focused on making positive change.

Hosted by the CDNIS Global Goals Council (GGC), this was the city's first student-led virtual SDG summit and featured more than 600 students from Hong Kong and other parts of Asia, as well as an array of prestigious keynote speakers.

"This year's summit was originally planned as a face-to-face event with an afternoon of direct community engagement for 200 participants, led by our four partner NGOs, but with the current government-imposed restrictions this was no longer a possibility," explained Matthew Schulte, a CDNIS teacher and GGC adviser.

Schulte, who was heavily involved with the organisation of the summit, said the council was committed to ensuring the event went ahead in a virtual format, regardless of the situation.

"Young people in Hong Kong have missed so many important educational opportunities over the past two years with school closures and extracurricular activity cancellations, so the HK SDG Summit has provided a new opportunity for community engagement, education and collaboration in these uncertain times," he said.

Highlights from the event included a keynote presentation from Sonalie Figueiras, the founder of Green Queen, as well as *Forbes* "30 Under 30 Asia" social

entrepreneur Melati Wijsen, who co-founded the youth empowerment project Youthtopia. Expert panel discussions and workshops featured some of Hong Kong's most prominent NGOs, including the Crossroads Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, the ITS Foundation, Christian Action and Feeding Hong Kong.

"The SDG Summit and other similar events are incredibly important as they galvanise youth voices. What we need more than ever is youngsters to organise and fight against the lethargy and apathy of previous generations in averting the climate crisis," said Figueiras.

"The climate crisis is the single biggest threat facing humankind and it affects every aspect of our lives, from food and land to fashion, energy and fertility. On a grass-roots level, we need to build more awareness on how acute the crisis actually is."

In addition to Youthtopia, the 21-year-old Wijsen has also founded Bye Bye Plastic Bags with her younger sister, and started youth movement One Island One Voice and social enterprise Mountain Mamas. She has given two global TED talks and been named in various media as one of the most influential young women in the world, including *Forbes*, *Time* and CNN. She describes herself as a "full-time changemaker and movement builder".

"I always say that change often starts in the classroom," Wijsen said. "That is why I am a big fan of events such as the SDG Summit because it brings students together and opens space for real-world discussions. It is so empowering and very exciting to be part of an event like this."



Sonalie Figueiras, Hong Kong's "Green Queen". Photo: Lucky Fish Photography



Canadian International School Hong Kong (CDNIS) hosted the city's second annual Hong Kong Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Summit on March 12. Photo: CDNIS

Even though Wijsen is busy with Youthtopia and many other projects and movements, she believes a key to making a real change is to avoid distraction – especially in a world with a seemingly endless number of crises.

"Focus, focus, focus. That is my daily mantra," she explained. "It can be so easy to get distracted and think that you can do it all, but we can create more impact when we are aligned and see a vision of change clearly."

Although the SDG Summit was a youth-oriented conference, it also featured workshops from experienced changemakers and NGO leaders, including Danny Harrington, a Hong Kong-based educator and sustainability teacher and mentor who has worked on running alternative flexible-learning model schools since 1997. He founded ITS Education Asia in 2005 to improve educational access by using non-traditional methods to allow students to gain access to US, UK and International Baccalaureate (IB) education.

He echoed Figueiras' sentiments on climate change while also touching on issues like income inequality, and explained how the issues are intertwined.

"The way we have developed our economic systems over the last 200 years has created the two crises of wealth inequality and the climate crisis," Harrington said. "Everything else flows from that. At the grass roots, we need empowerment, funding and facilitating of community groups to identify and solve the issues that they deem most important to them, within a sustainable framework so that we stop the acceptance of negative externalities which blight so many decisions by one group against others."

He finished off by saying if people were "more kind and less greedy, it would solve a lot of problems".



When children are busy at play, they are busy at work!



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MANAGING WELLNESS

TAKING STEPS TO ENSURE STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

The pandemic has been as tough on young minds as any, and teachers should familiarise themselves with signs of anxiety and depression in pupils, writes **John Cremer**

Leading schools in Hong Kong have always been alert to signs of stress, anxiety and alienation among the student body. But as the city enters a third year of pandemic-related disruptions, the need for this kind of vigilance, plus the pastoral care and counselling that goes with it, has become more important than ever.

Despite upbeat talk about their resilience and adaptability, the plain fact is that most school-age children find uncertainty and frequent changes disconcerting, or worse. And that only adds to the pressures already inherent in the education system, especially when crucial exams are looming, which will define chances for university places and future career prospects.

"At the moment, I am seeing very high levels of anxiety and fear," says Katrina Rozga, director of therapy and counselling at the Jadis Blurton Family Development Center. "Kids like consistency and to know what is going to happen, so when things keep changing, and there are more restrictions, they can begin to act out as a means of dealing with that."

Rozga notes that over the past year some parents have been seeing regressions in behaviour, as well as instances of "clinginess", difficulties in interacting with people from outside the family, and trouble with concentrating on set tasks.

"Depression is also beginning to rear its head," she adds. "Students are feeling more isolated and less certain about the future. Adolescents need social interaction and time with their friends, and many say they feel really low because they haven't been able to interact regularly in person among a group. Often, they also find they are struggling with school work and not learning as much as they should, because trying to concentrate online all day is difficult."

In most cases a combination of online schooling, less physical activity, confinement at home with multiple distractions, and the nagging sense of missing out on shared fun, new achievements and some of the usual milestones has been at the root of the problem.

All these factors decrease motivation, interest and attention spans. At the same time, they increase boredom, worries and loneliness and can easily lead to outbursts in terms of bad behaviour, self-isolation or "coping" in generally unhelpful ways.

"Some of the best advice I can give teachers and parents is to get very familiar with the signs of anxiety and depression so you can recognise it more readily," says Rozga, who is also an executive committee member of the Psychotherapy Society of Hong Kong. "Noticing and asking straightforward questions about mood can give your kids or students the chance to tell you if they are struggling. A lot of the time, children just need an outlet, someone to talk to and an opportunity to let their feelings out. Therefore, it is important to recognise that need and fill it. Asking for help is much harder than answering a yes or no question, so make sure to ask – and ask often."

For teachers specifically, another key point is to do one-on-one check-ins with students every so often during online classes. This allows them to continue to act as a "first line of defence" in spotting problems or changes in behaviour and thus making it possible to flag any concerns early on.

At Nord Anglia International School Hong Kong (NAISHK), that is just one of the steps taken to maintain positivity in the school community during unprecedented times. It relies on a blended approach featuring



A lot of the time, children just need an outlet, someone to talk to and an opportunity to let their feelings out. Asking for help is much harder than answering a yes or no question, so make sure to ask – and ask often

synchronous and asynchronous learning designed to keep students motivated and engaged.

One objective is to reduce the amount of screen time required each day. Another is to build a sense of belonging and community so that students feel connected and positive about their schoolwork, other activities, the challenges involved, and where it is all leading.

"As part of this, we have a tutor time programme centred around well-being, purpose and resilience," says Elliott Scrivener, pastoral lead at NAISHK. "And every morning, our secondary students start the day with an activity based around one of six strands of well-being."

To go with that, there have also been several house competitions for the whole school over the past few months, including a "community well-being challenge" which last year saw families invited to complete over 40 health-based activities.

More recently, but similarly intended to unite, enliven and boost all-round morale, an NAISHK's Got Talent event was launched, giving students, parents and teachers the perfect way to forget their day-to-day worries for a while and simply have a good time.

"During the pandemic, the most common issue we have seen is a rise in anxiety," Scrivener says. "We are lucky, though, to have an incredibly supportive

Schoolchildren have been denied the chance to learn among their peers for much of the past two years. Photo: GSIS



All six CUGO counsellors, are equipped with specialist knowledge of different university destinations, and professional experience in university admissions and university guidance counselling.

Paving the way to winning university applications at YCIS

In today's increasingly globalised society, tertiary education is in great demand as students compete fiercely to gain admission to top universities around the world. With the stakes of applying to prestigious degree programmes at an all-time high, the Careers and University Guidance Office (CUGO) in Yew Chung International School (YCIS) helps students gain a competitive edge and maximise their chances of success in university and beyond.

At YCIS, a team of leading university guidance counsellors work closely with students to place them in a university that matches their academic, social and personal growth needs. All six CUGO counsellors, hailing from diverse backgrounds, are equipped with specialist knowledge of different university destinations, alongside a combined total of more than 50 years of professional experience in university admissions and university guidance counselling. As a result of this breadth and depth of expertise, YCIS has a university placement rate of 100%, with countless students accepted to top global universities year after year.

Laying the groundwork from a young age

YCIS believes that early preparation is crucial for students to build a strong foundation for their educational and professional pursuits. As such, Secondary students from all school years are encouraged to meet and work with CUGO counsellors to identify their academic and career interests, as well as their personal qualities, strengths and skills early on. For those who are unsure of their future path, Nick Strong, Regional Coordinator for Careers and University Guidance at YCYW Education Network, notes that a number of university research tools and guidance courses are available to help them explore and define their passion, goals, and direction.

CUGO also assists students in identifying and developing the skills required for their particular aspirations. The Advanced University Preparation Programme, for example, is specially designed to help gifted students develop critical skills and attributes expected by highly selective universities.

Additionally, academic planning is provided to students from Year 9 onwards. "Year 9 is an important phase in a student's academic journey as they have to choose their IGCSE subjects," explains Dr Alvin Kwan, University Guidance Counsellor at YCIS Hong Kong. "Hence, we discuss with students to ensure that their choices for both IGCSE and IB align with their career aspirations."

Holistic & individualised support

As students enter Year 12, they are each assigned a CUGO counsellor for one-to-one support. "They learn how to explore university options, build their personal portfolios, maximise their summer breaks to learn new skills, explore their academic interests, and acquire relevant work experience," Kwan outlines.

When exploring university options, CUGO aids students in conducting thorough and detailed research by making all aspects of the selection process clear. Key areas of consideration include the university's size, location, research specialism, course content and assessment methods. "Students should select universities based on the concept of best-fit rather than purely on league table rankings," says Strong. "This means they have to take into account whether the university and the course will give them the skills, the knowledge, the experience and the judgement that they need to go on to that next stage in their career."

Throughout the application process, CUGO adopts a strategic approach to help students increase their chances of getting into top-choice universities. "We advise them on the optimum time to submit their applications," Strong continues. "For example, those who have attained excellent predicted grades early on in the year should apply early. On the other hand, those requiring additional time to raise their predicted grades should apply later on in the year."

CUGO also advises students to apply to different universities that correspond to various possible examination results. These include 'reach universities' for when students perform better than expected; 'match universities' for when students achieve expected grades; and 'safety universities' for when students perform worse than expected. At the same time, CUGO works with students to ensure that they do not send in too many applications as it can interfere with their academic work.

Other areas of support offered by CUGO include personal statement guidance, co-curricular activities and work experience guidance, test and interview preparations, and scholarship and financial advice. In receiving comprehensive, one-to-one support, students are not only better placed to meet the academic requirements of their chosen universities, but are also equipped to meet the demands and challenges of university life.

Strong connections with leading universities

The individualised support offered by CUGO is made more effective with the team's access to the latest and most accurate university admissions information. "CUGO has strong professional connections with higher education admissions officers as well as academics. These relationships enable us to acquire information on the most up-to-date admissions and student recruitment trends in higher education in many popular university destinations, allowing us to tailor our support accordingly," Kwan elucidates.

Over the years, CUGO has been invited to interview training sessions offered by Oxford and Cambridge, which has equipped the team with more significant expertise in helping students navigate the competitive application

Brought to you by YCIS

Jasmine Chan



Jasmine's passion for studying Medicine stemmed primarily from her experience of participating in Seeds of Hope, a service-learning co-curricular programme organised by the YCIS schools. As part of the programme, Jasmine embarked on an overseas trip to the Philippines, where she was given the opportunity to observe and assist in childbirth at a local clinic. Having witnessed first-hand the healthcare challenges faced by less developed countries, Jasmine hopes to join Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) in the future to deliver quality medical service to more people in these areas.

Ermina Shahid

As an aspiring doctor, Ermina believes that health is the biggest blessing that a person can have. Hence, she considers it a great joy and privilege to study Medicine as it will enable her to offer more people the priceless gift of wellbeing. Motivated by the desire to make a positive impact in society, Ermina is confident and determined to overcome any challenges along the way.



Nga Sze Wong



Having undergone life-saving surgery in one of the hospitals in Hong Kong at a young age, Nga Sze is grateful for the healthcare that the city has provided to its people and would like to give back to society by becoming a doctor. She looks forward to working with other healthcare workers in Hong Kong to improve people's health and enhance their living standards.

Derun Li

Ever since an announcement for the Hong Kong Physics Olympiad caught his eye nine years ago, Derun has been inspired to pursue physics at a higher level. Having achieved stellar results in the competition year after year, he was selected to attend the prestigious Physics Enhancement Programme for Gifted Students offered by the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Looking ahead, Derun is excited to read Physics at Oxford, where he can engage with leading professors in the field and contribute to frontier research.



process at top universities. Leveraging on its strong network of connections, CUGO also regularly invites admissions professionals and academics from global universities to deliver academic taster lectures or specialised workshops for students' benefit.

Broadening horizons

A plethora of opportunities is provided by CUGO for students to get in touch and gain a deeper understanding of different universities around the world. The annual university fair, organised by CUGO, is attended by over 90 global universities. Together with more than 150 individual visits by universities and academics across the world each year, students and parents are given valuable opportunities to meet with university representatives from Hong Kong and overseas, including Australia, Canada, the UK and the US. A special principal recommendation scheme is also offered by YCIS for students who would like to study in prestigious universities, such as Tsinghua University, in Mainland China.

Insights from YCIS talents

This year, with the help of CUGO, three YCIS students – Jasmine Chan, Ermina Shahid and Nga Sze Wong, have received early offers to pursue Medicine at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In addition, Derun Li, another YCIS student, has received an offer to study Physics at the University of Oxford.

In the next issue of Good Schools Guide, these four students will share their personal experience of how CUGO helped them throughout the university application process. They will also reflect on their learning journey at YCIS and give valuable advice on studying for IB and applying to top universities around the world.

■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■



NAISHK partnered with Australia's Monash University for training. Photo: Handout



Online learning has been the norm for much of the pandemic. Photo: NAIS

community and range of programmes in place to provide help. For example, each student has a 'well-being call teacher' they can speak to on a regular basis. This helps to identify issues which can then be referred to our pastoral team."

The school also has a "helping us cope" support group, which focuses on explaining effective strategies for dealing with anxieties and other related concerns. Encouragingly, a number of students have self-referred, asking to take part in the group.

"A real strength of the school is the way we form strong relationships based on open communication with both parents and students," Scrivener says. "This is central to dealing with any mental health and well-being issue and means we have been able to swiftly put any necessary support in place."

Scott MacKinnon, deputy head of secondary (pastoral) at NAISHK, adds that a further element is a tie-up with Australia's Monash University, which provides trained counsellors ready to work with students, teaching staff and the pastoral team. In addition, the school has established strong links with external agencies in Hong Kong and turned to outside psychologists to ensure everyone is on the same page when it comes to assisting vulnerable students.

"Involving parents is the key to establishing a strong support network," MacKinnon says. "That's why we are about to launch a series of webinars focusing on digital parenting. And it's why we have an affiliation with the [UK's] Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, one of the world's leading organisations for research, training and treatment of children's mental health needs. This means our staff has access to first-class training."

At German Swiss International School (GSIS), stepped-up communication during the strictures of Covid-19 has been essential in helping everyone get through. That began with a general message for students to focus on what they can control in their lives on any given day, which extends from what they eat to how much they exercise, their behaviour, acts of kindness, and keeping a close eye on the amount of time spent on social media.

"We send reminders that we are all in this together and that the school is always there to support anyone who asks for help," says Simon Misso-Veness, GSIS deputy principal and head of English international stream. "We make a point of encouraging students to connect with their friends, and we run group sessions to make that happen."

Besides that, there is a weekly newsletter outlining practical tips and resources. And teachers have found ways to use the "home environment" by including pets, hobbies and dress-up days as online class activities.

"There is also an open dialogue about different emotions and general well-being," says Susan Hood, secondary deputy head at GSIS. "For instance, the school counsellor leads classes in primary to help children acknowledge and normalise their feelings, practise

wellness and coping skills together, and facilitate games that allow kids to socialise and interact in ways that they are otherwise missing out on."

Such sessions also allow children to show gratitude, share news or pass on tips on creative ways to lift one's mood, or simply not worry too much about events in the wider world. "We made changes to teaching strategies as a result of student feedback after the initial online classes," Misso-Veness says. "That led to a reduction in homework and overall workload, longer breaks between lessons, and less screen time."

The school has also continued to run around 20 extracurricular activities, including debating, music and drama. A special "online stress-proofing" course was introduced for Years 12 and 13. And targeted interventions have been arranged through the student support team to assist any at-risk individuals.

"The main thing for us is to have clear communication and to listen to the student voice," Hood says.

"If necessary, school counsellors may recommend referral to external experts. But in any case, we consult a child psychologist on best practice for supporting children in times like these, and we monitor websites such as ISCA and Mind HK."

Looking ahead to the post-pandemic, Rogza is optimistic about school life quickly returning to normal. She does, however, caution about the lingering effects of seclusion, physical inactivity and mental strain.

"I think this is a worry for most people," she says. "But what we've seen in the last couple of years is that children are incredibly resilient and, as long as they have the right support, they can come back from anything. We do have to be prepared, though, to offer that support to those who need it most. It won't be an immediate bounce back."

German Swiss International School stepped up with regular reminders to exercise, stay healthy and stay off social media.
Photo: GSIS





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SOFT SKILLS

BEYOND EXAM GRADES AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Hong Kong's international schools have a reputation for providing students with excellent maths scores and language proficiency, but what about soft skills? By **Douglas Parkes**



The workforce of tomorrow will require very different skills to that of yesterday. Photo: Shrewsbury International School

In 2016, the World Economic Forum published a report, "The Future of Jobs", which looked at employment, skills and workforce strategies for the future. Its authors asked chief human resources and strategy officers from global employers about current workforce trends and what they would mean for employment, skills and recruitment in the years to come.

One of the report's headline findings was that experts believed that by 2021 "over one-third of skills (35 per cent) that are considered important in today's workforce will have changed". By 2025, "The Future of Jobs" predicted that critical thinking, complex problem-solving abilities, creativity, people management and emotional intelligence would be among the most important skills required in the workplace.

Covid-19 has accelerated this shift. The pandemic required employees and managers to find new ways to communicate when working from home and to empathise more with each other's different living conditions when lockdowns were in force. Given the chaotic situation, problem-solving became a valuable trait, as well as emotional intelligence given the new and unforeseen

stressors employees were encountering. Suddenly articles about the value of soft skills were all the rage.

The excellent reputation of Hong Kong's international schools is in large part founded on the hard skills they rigorously instil in students – STEAM subjects and the like. But while such schools are experts at delivering on easily quantifiable things like maths scores and language proficiency, what about soft skills?

Dr Jadis Blurton, head of school at The Harbour School (THS), admits "although [soft skills] have always been important, they have historically been neglected by schools or relegated to extracurricular activities". However, "attention to these 21st-century skills is pervasive" at The Harbour School, says Blurton, citing one of the school's core values, "lifeworthy learning", which encompasses various soft skills like time management, collaboration, flexibility, innovation, problem-solving, critical thinking, leadership, self-direction and communication, among others.

THS takes pride in being at the forefront of developing students' soft skills. The school has identified seven "learner goals" that are "discussed, defined and actively

noticed" throughout the school. These are: perceptiveness, inquisitiveness, self-determination, integration within yourself, integration among others, resilience and innovation.

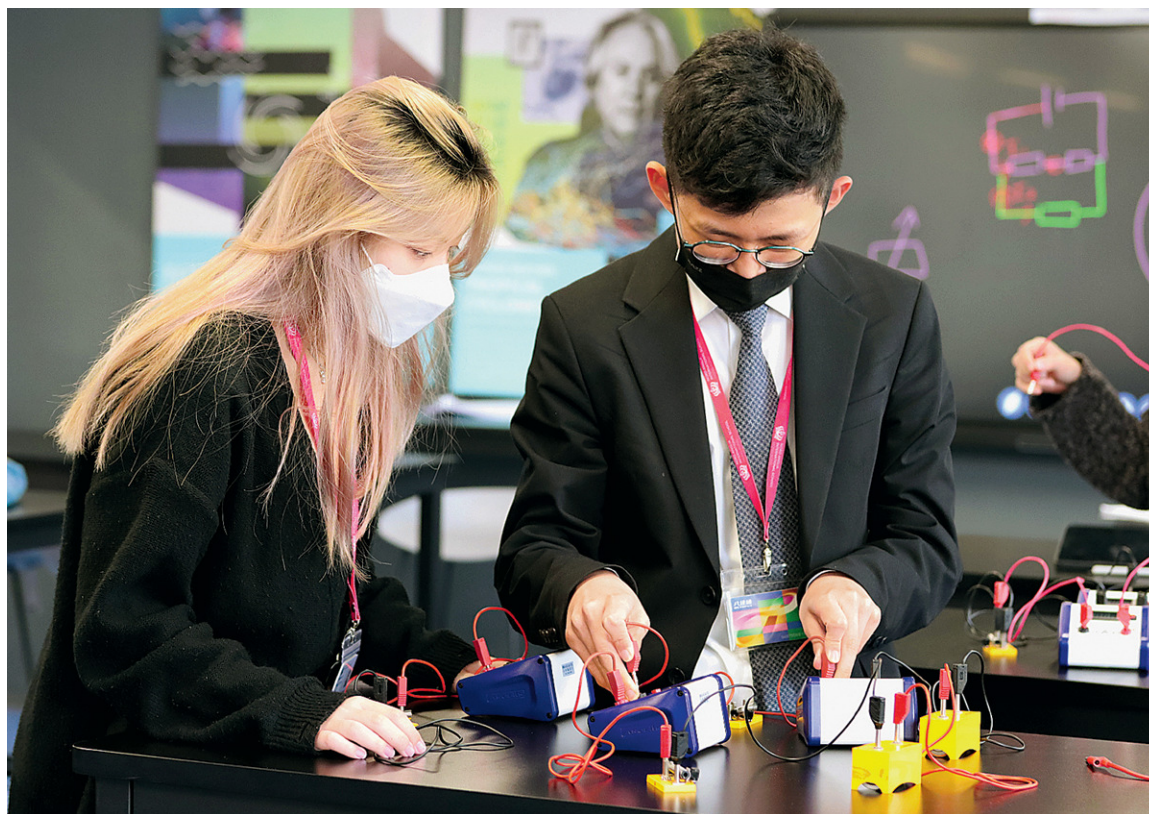
"These soft skills are not measured at most schools," says Blurton, "but at THS they are reported by every class and specialist teacher as well as self-scored by every student in every different class."

Students – and parents – understand that what is important is what is measured.

"The learner goals are introduced and discussed through assemblies, our morning TIDE programmes, and in everyday lessons," Blurton adds. "Children as young as four can be found arguing about whether working collaboratively to finish a maths assignment is 'self-determined,' 'resilient' or 'integrated among others' – the answer being, of course, that it is a little of all three."

At Shrewsbury International School Hong Kong, the promotion of soft skill development and articulation has come about in response to the wider recognition that "traditional academic descriptors are not a particularly effective indicator for differentiating between the

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Learning traditional STEM-based disciplines like science is only half the story today. Photo: Nord Anglia International School.

likelihood that one candidate will perform more successfully than another at university or in the workplace,” according to principal Ben Keeling.

Here, at the school in Tseung Kwan O, an interconnected mix of hard and soft skills has long been a key part of their teaching, which is founded upon the knowledge-based framework afforded by the English national curriculum. “As a result, we have made a conscious decision to teach, track and monitor skill development in the following areas: critical thinking, problem-solving, innovation and collaboration,” says Keeling.

Another school that utilises the English national curriculum is Nord Anglia International School (NAIS) Hong Kong. Teachers here have long valued arts subjects as well as the traditional STEM ones. Emma Parker, assistant head of primary – curriculum and assessment, says that subjects like art, drama and music have “invaluable skills” before adding, “It is difficult to imagine how any technological advancement can be successful without high levels of creativity, critique and reflection – key components of the arts.”

The need for online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic has sharpened NAIS’ focus on the role technology plays in our world. The school is aware that its charges are likely to live out their careers in a workplace that will be dominated by things like automation and AI.

It’s these trends that make soft skills all the more important. If computers can do all the number crunching for humans, there is less need for individuals with similar mathematical abilities. Soft skills, which computers cannot match, are thus much more precious. Not only are they valuable for education and work, they are humanising, too.

“The future of work and the skills needed for the 21st century are widely acknowledged to include soft skills as core attributes,” says Naima Charlier, director of teaching and learning at NAIS. “Alongside important values such as the belief that people should be treated equally and fairly, and developing an international outlook – so important in the interconnected world we live in – soft skills are what could be described as those skills that make us human. They are the ones that separate us from computers which are increasingly taking on roles and jobs traditionally held by people.

“In developing their soft skills, we are preparing our students for success in a fast-changing and increasingly digital world.”

But what of Covid-19’s impact? Writing previously in the *Good Schools Guide*, Katrina Rozga, director of therapy and counselling at Hong Kong’s Jadis Blurton Family Development Centre and a registered therapist, shone a spotlight on the “social malnutrition” caused by the pandemic and discussed how factors such as reduced social contact, isolation, higher rates of stress and anxiety,

and an overall lack of normal socialisation “have all contributed to children’s lagging development”.

Teaching pupils soft skills under these circumstances has been extremely challenging. “Just talk to anyone who works with children under the age of five,” remarks Shrewsbury’s Keeling. “Given the nature of these particular skills, rehearsed interaction – both formally constructed and socially emergent – plays a critical role in successful development. While an online construct doesn’t prohibit social interaction per se, the combined response to Covid-19 in Hong Kong has made it more challenging for young people to interact fluidly to the extent that would ordinarily be best recommended.”

Older children appear more resilient. Charlier has been deeply impressed by the adaptability of NAIS students as they continue to work in teams and collaborate on projects virtually. “We cannot replace face-to-face interactions with virtual, but we have seen our students

experience success in developing the language, manners and communication mechanisms of virtual team work,” she says.

Students at the school, particularly the older ones, took the initiative to create shared documents, utilise breakout rooms, share screens and put to use the various apps and digital platforms available to them.

So impressive was their shift to online learning that Charlier says she believes that her pupils have matched or even outperformed the work done by adults who had to manage a similar move to remote working.

The Harbour School also received surprisingly upbeat feedback regarding the use and development of soft skills during this tricky time – not to mention the discrepancy between versatile kids and more inflexible adults.

“Interestingly, in a recent interview with some of our students they noted that many of these skills were enhanced during Covid,” says Blurton. “They reported that they felt more resilient, self-reliant, innovative and flexible, and they felt that they had improved their ability to manage their time on their own. It was good to hear that some students did not necessarily agree with the dire predictions made by worried adults.”

Blurton was also keen to emphasise that soft skills and STEAM subjects should not be seen as mutually exclusive. According to the head of The Harbour School, effectively teaching STEAM subjects will enhance and strengthen a pupil’s soft skills, and vice versa.

“At the same time,” she tells us, “I think there is a trend towards recognising that not all students will be or should be focused ‘almost exclusively’ on STEAM subjects. Some students are writers, dancers or filmmakers, and while they need a firm background in science and the ability to problem-solve, they may benefit more from spending time in their area of interest or expertise than taking advanced calculus.

“That is, I think the trend is not away from STEAM but more towards an acceptance and celebration of individual differences in goals and abilities.”

The interconnectedness of STEAM and soft skills is an opinion shared by both Parker and Keeling. The former tells us: “Soft skills are fundamental to success within STEAM subjects. Without the ability to effectively work under pressure, manage time and be decisive, it would be impossible to complete STEAM-based projects.

Meanwhile Keeling believes schools have been “overreliant” on academic performance and exam grades when it comes to assessing pupils and their abilities.

“We will soon see a revolution in the way in which we assess the performance and potential of young people,” he adds.



The Harbour School has identified seven soft, but quantifiable, “learner goals”. Photo: Handout

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BEYOND STEM

THE BENEFITS OF CREATIVE ARTS IN EDUCATION

Art-based activities help to develop and enhance a child's communication skills and cognitive abilities, and can even help build a sense of self, writes **Jacqueline Kot**



The seemingly simple act of drawing a picture with crayons or paint can benefit a child's mental development as much as reading, mathematics and other aspects of their education that are often prioritised over art.

From the obvious benefits such as helping children practise their motor skills to the lesser-known pros such as nurturing their ability to solve problems, educators share how art can bring more than colour and joy to a child's educational journey.

Improving motor skills

Getting children to pick and choose from an array of colours – whether crayons, colouring pencils, felt pens, chalks or paints – and then create something specific or based on their own imagination helps them hone their fine motor skills in a fun and creative way.

"It is important in early years to develop fine motor skills and cognitive development – this can be achieved creatively by printing, drawing, cutting, painting and controlling choices in materials and tools," says Genevieve Spizzirri, the art curriculum leader for Kellett School's Kowloon Bay Preparatory School.

"The development of fine motor skills is critical to later adult abilities. When a child holds a paintbrush, glues buttons onto paper, or uses scissors to cut pieces of paper, they are engaging and advancing these essential skills," says Zoe Heggie, lower school vice principal for Early Years to Grade 1 at Canadian International School of Hong Kong (CDNIS).

At Hong Kong International School (HKIS), teachers encourage the children to be bolder with their choice of materials through creative lessons that go beyond common options such as paint and colouring pencils.

"Aside from building creativity and generating ideas, we encourage children to take risks with tools and materials. We do this by exposing children to interesting art-making processes and tools they may not be familiar with," explains Kit Lang, art teacher at HKIS – Lower Primary. "Through this process of experimentation and discovery, children build fine motor skills, problem-solving abilities and learn new ways of overcoming challenges."

Lang shares an example of one lesson where children got to learn about the stained glass windows by a legendary architect before making their own version.

"One recent lesson illustrating how this looks in the classroom is a stained-glass window children made using coloured tissue paper and plastic laminate. Children designed a composition based on the stained-glass windows of the late American architect Frank-Lloyd Wright before designing their own," she says.

Nurturing communication skills

Art-based activities are a form of personal expression and hence a way for children to communicate more in both verbal and non-verbal ways.

"By producing art, children can visually communicate a feeling, thought or idea without the use of speech or language. Art transcends language and communicates without it," says Charlie Gorrington, art curriculum leader at Kellett School's Pok Fu Lam Preparatory School. "Embedding this during early years builds confidence and broadens the skills for so much more than what is often assumed is just drawing or painting."

Emma Hewett-Smiles, elementary art teacher at Carmel School, points out that children are engaged in enhanced listening and communication skills in most activities that involved art.

Art classes offer pupils a chance to communicate in ways not explored in conventional academic subjects. Photo: Kellett School

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**By producing art, children can visually communicate a feeling, thought or idea without the use of speech or language ...
Art transcends language**



“Art can also enhance communication and listening skills, self-esteem and social skills, as well as encourage focus and discipline. For example, enhanced communication and listening skills are showed and incorporated in almost every activity in the art curriculum. Students are expected to listen to instructions and relay this information into each and every activity,” she says.

Hewett-Smiles says that getting children to express themselves through art also has positive benefits on their well-being. “There are benefits of emotional expression which for some students can have a positive effect in instilling focus, concentration and have a calming effect, all of which can have a positive effect on other studies and on personal well-being in general,” she says.

And once the piece of art is created, the next step of getting children to describe and explain their creation is another way to nurture good communication skills.

“Children can use art to represent their experiences and their noticings [sic] of the world. These can be evident through the work itself or through a verbal explanation given when a child is asked ‘what would you like to tell me about your artwork?’,” says Allison Banbury, principal of ESF Tung Chung International Kindergarten.

Helping develop cognitive thinking

When children are using their imagination to create something, they are tapping into their cognitive abilities and allowing their mental capacities to grow in the process.

Says Heggie from CDNIS: “Research shows that there are numerous and wide-ranging benefits for young children who experience the creative arts at school. Arguably the most significant from an education perspective is that the creative arts foster the development of children’s cognitive abilities. Exploring and taking part in creative activities trigger the use of children’s imagination, which in turn stimulates and expands their mental capacities.

“Not only are artistic endeavours supreme sources of joy for young children, they are vitally important ways of encouraging their full cognitive development, confidence, independence of mind, spontaneity, cultivation of wonder, and overall state of positive mental health.”

Children get to practise and strengthen their higher thinking skills, whether it is about cause and effect, decision-making or problem-solving.

“Children need to utilise organisational skills within their thought process to think about how to get to their

final product, as well as to be open to changes throughout their process,” says Stephanie Julian, coordinator of the programme at Carmel School’s Holly Rofé Early Learning Centre.

“Many different factors play a role in art, including planning and organising thoughts, problem-solving, and cause and effect,” she says. “Before children start an activity, we get them thinking about how to embark on the process, and the result they would like to achieve. Art encourages building and developing these life skills.”

And any parent who has observed their child engrossed in an arts and crafts activity long enough for them to take a much-needed breather will agree that art can increase children’s ability to concentrate.

“Art increases cognitive function, raises serotonin levels and produces dopamine which increases concentration, memory capabilities and drive. When your brain is focused on art the ‘back door’ features of the brain kick in, filing mechanical information and organising the rest of learning,” says Spizzirri from Kellett School.

Creating a piece of artwork together also encourages children to interact with one another, thus allowing them to learn how to collaborate and socialise.

“Art enables us to gain a sense of self – what are the experiences and interests that we want to share with others and how can this be achieved. Art can strengthen children’s cultural identity and enhance their understanding of others as they encounter various materials, techniques and artefacts,” says Banbury from ESF Tung Chung International Kindergarten.

“Opportunities for joining others to create a collaborative piece of art support and promote children’s social development as children negotiate, talk with each other, listen, problem-solve and join in the joy of experimenting and creating together.”

Building a strong foundation

When children develop these skills through art, this will also benefit how they approach subjects such as reading, writing and arithmetic. “Art draws on so many educational subjects and areas of development – creativity, cognitive development, mathematical skills, spatial awareness, problem-solving, science, cause and effect,” says Julian from Carmel School.

Hewett-Smiles, Julian’s colleague at Carmel School, agrees: “Through art, children are given opportunities to develop skills and experiences in problem-solving, fine motor skills, collaboration, exploration, logic and reasoning, and play. Play, in particular, is an important

aspect of the early childhood curriculum because it is through play that children discover the world around them as well as learn about relationships and cooperation. These skills can be transferred into other subjects not only in school but in other areas of life,” she says.

Fostering independent learning

Children generally find art to be fun and need little encouragement to engage and continue with an activity, giving them ownership of the task at hand and what they are learning. “Children are naturally happy and engaged in the process of making art, which sets them up as agents of their own learning from an early age,” says CDNIS’ Heggie.

“In kindergarten and primary, the benefits of art and creative activities allow children to explore, experiment and more importantly, give them a space where they can express themselves entirely,” says Gorringer from Kellett School. “Lessons are structured yet allow freedom to move in the way that they wish. Different narratives and opinions are discussed, giving them ownership in everything that they do.”

Banbury and her former colleague at ESF Tung Chung International Kindergarten, Tania Peterson, emphasise that the materials used in art can do wonders in developing a child’s curiosity and willingness to learn.

“In kindergarten, art supports children’s natural curiosity to make meaning. Children play with materials they encounter. What a material can do determines the learning potential and the agency of the child to explore and impact the material, as the child discovers what it is and how to use it,” says Banbury.

“The children build up theories that are forever changing based on the outcomes of their ongoing research of the materials. Children observe, predict, discover, ask questions, try things out, problem-solve, experiment and share ideas and outcomes.”

Julian from Carmel School shares an example of a lesson she taught, where children created artwork using Vincent van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* as inspiration, and how the children took pride and ownership in conceptualising and creating their own picture.

“The children, aged four-to-five years, looked at van Gogh’s work and created their own impressions from still life. They planned their picture before they began and, step by step, were able to create outstanding individual impressions of still life. It was heart-warming to see their pride in what they produced and their love of the process.”

Focus and self-discipline can be taught and learned through art. Photo: ESF



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