


The Playground Classroom

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Under the slide and climbing structure, an ice cream shop opens its doors. In unison, four Pre-K 3 students shout out: “Ice cream! Come get your ice cream!”

Their recipe is unconventional: mix equal parts wood chips, memory, and imagination. Sprinkle with dirt. Stir well. Serve with an ear-to-ear grin.

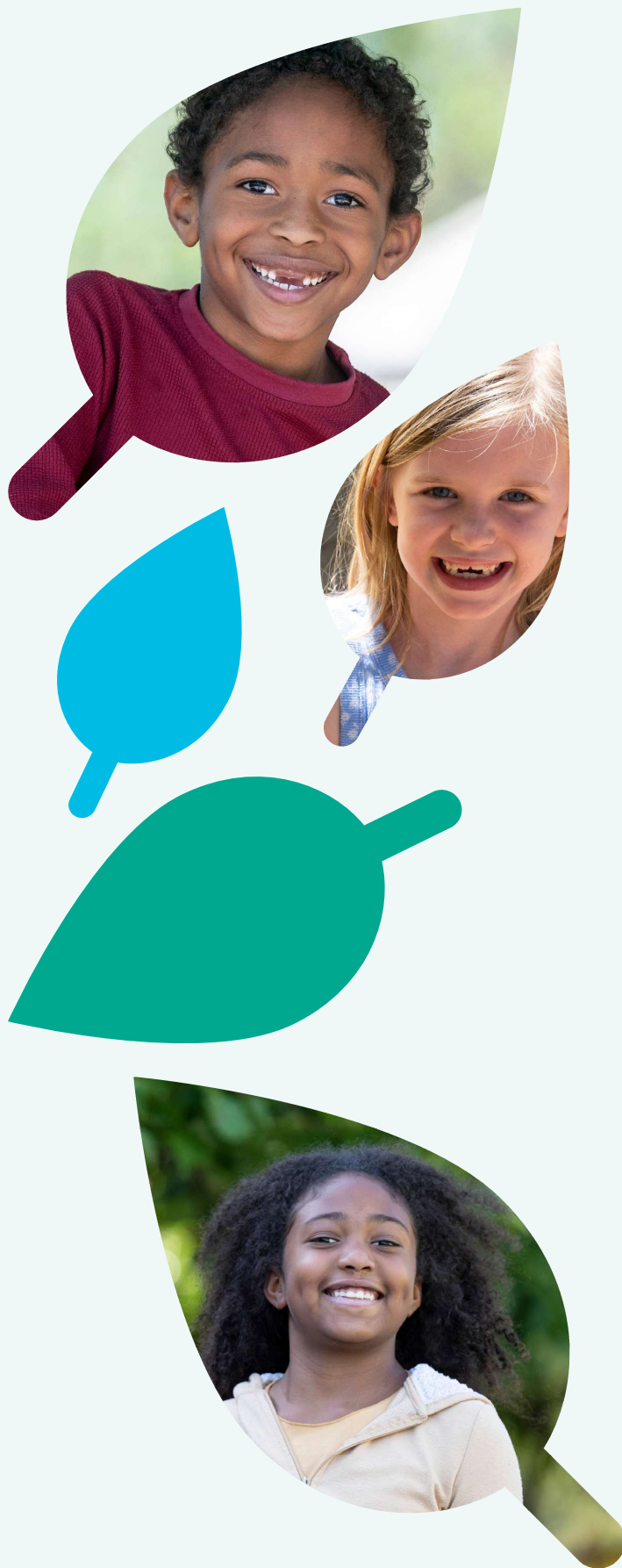
The simplicity of this playful exchange belies the complex social-emotional, visual-motor, linguistic, and cognitive processes at work within it.

Play is a powerful tool for learning; indeed, play *is* learning.

Educational theorists, developmental biologists, and anthropologists agree that, at play, children are students of the world around them, joyfully practicing skills that will serve them throughout their lives. Capacities vital to the life of purpose and compassion we strive toward at NPS—like empathy, curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, and self-regulation—are shown to be fostered by play.

As teachers, observing play allows us to track student progression through a variety of skills in a natural, organic setting, and use this information to inform individualized teaching practice and curriculum.





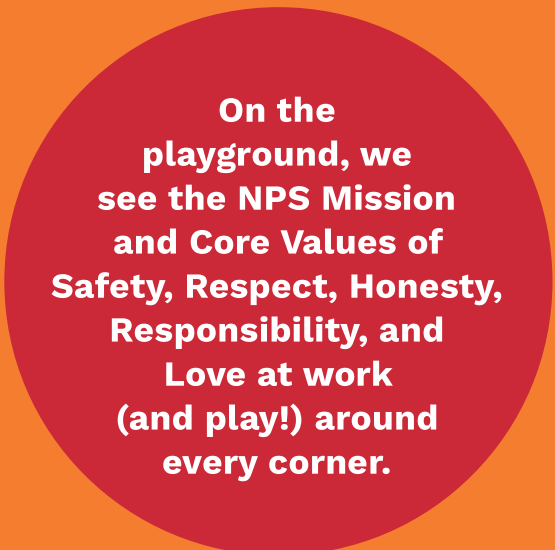
One bowl of wood chip ice cream contains rich information about each student’s development.

When they prepare wood chip ice cream, Pre-K 3 students must recall and interpret past experiences so that they can assume roles, imaginatively taking on another’s perspective. Ice cream makers must gather, stir, lift, and pinch, building motor strength and endurance. They must collaborate, sharing space, ideas, and materials. If there are disagreements—and there are disagreements!—they must make compromises and exercise self-control. Communication skills, like asking questions, listening, using appropriate vocabulary, and expressing oneself confidently, are critical to this. Students also demonstrate budding mathematical reasoning as they ask, “Do you want a small ice cream or medium or large?” or count out five leaf “dollars” owed for the treat.

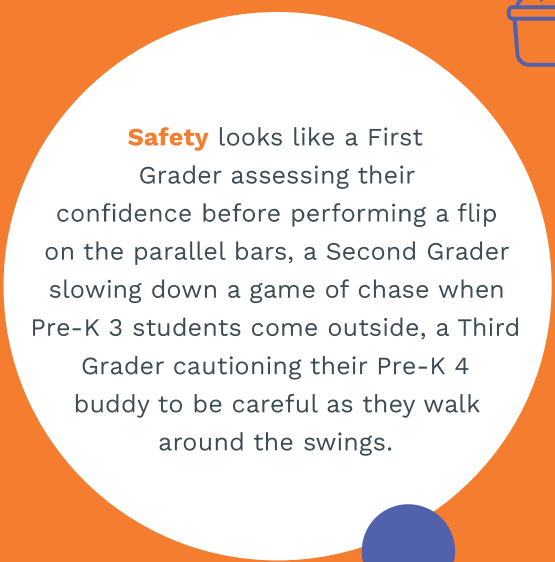
The particular magic of playful learning is that it is child-led. There is room to take time, focus, and make mistakes without fear of failure.

Teachers can support and intervene as necessary, of course, while knowing that children have much to learn from each other, and much to teach each other. Play defines and shapes the entire decade of childhood, its complexity growing as the students do.


When we understand play as learning, the playground becomes both an extension of the classroom and an essential component of student success within it. In the “playground classroom,” students are not contained by walls, schedules, or “indoor voices.” This is intentional. To build independence and self-confidence, we recognize that children at every grade level must be allowed the freedom to make choices, move their bodies, and follow their interests. In doing so, we serve the whole child, celebrating them not just as students but as friends, teammates, and individuals, each important and beloved in the NPS community.



On the playground, we see the NPS Mission and Core Values of Safety, Respect, Honesty, Responsibility, and Love at work (and play!) around every corner.



Safety looks like a First Grader assessing their confidence before performing a flip on the parallel bars, a Second Grader slowing down a game of chase when Pre-K 3 students come outside, a Third Grader cautioning their Pre-K 4 buddy to be careful as they walk around the swings.



Respect looks like a Pre-K 3 student beginning to understand that friends might want to play alone for a little bit, Third Graders listening to each other's ideas about how to pick fair teams, a Kindergartener gracefully giving their friend another turn to try if they can't quite make it across the monkey bars yet.

