

EARLY FOR SCHOOL

BY JESSICA GARCIA • PUBLISHED AUG 30, 2010



Tribune/Nathan Orme - Jennifer (middle) reads a book with her children Zane (left) and Kaelynn (right) at The Goddard School on Los Altos Parkway in Spanish Springs. Jennifer said her children, ages 3 and 5, are helping each other learn as they attend preschool.

SPARKS, MD: For Jennifer and her two children, Kaelynn, 5, and Zane, 3, their view of the moon is special.

“When we look at the moon, it’s not the moon anymore,” Jennifer said. “It’s ‘la luna.’ ”

Both of her children attend preschool at The Goddard School in Sparks and are learning everything in English, Spanish and sign language, their mother said Thursday. They also learn from each other.

“Zane picks up on what Kaelynn learns and Kaelynn is able to help Zane progress in his learning,” she said.

Local experts say sending a child to preschool is one of the best decisions a parent can make because of the valuable skills it teaches youngsters from an early age. These skills include socialization, recognizing shapes and colors, how to

count — everything that can establish a solid educational foundation and set them on a path to a healthy lifestyle.

Bridget Walsh, a University of Nevada, Reno professor who teaches human development and family studies and has a degree in child development, said early childhood education provides a positive launch for students to make better choices in life.

“Children who attend a quality preschool are more likely to stay in school, they’re more likely to go to college and they’re more likely to make those good life choices,” Walsh said. “The research is clear on that.

“My personal experience with preschool is that it teaches children what it’s like to be a friend, how to be cooperative, it gives them reading early skills and how to write the alphabet and write letters in their name,” she continued. “The most important thing is you want them to love learning and if they go to preschool, they’re more likely to do that.”

Jody Agaman, who co-owns the Sparks Goddard School with her husband John, said the overall objective when parents enroll their child is to make sure by the time they leave, they’re ready for elementary school.

“Our goal is to prepare and set them up for kindergarten and elementary school socially,” Agaman said. “Kindergarten today is what first grade used to be. Kids come in expected to know their letters and to read.”

Agaman said a shift in thought of how prepared a child should be in kindergarten has changed the approach to teaching in the first few years of a child’s life. So, the earlier parents start working with a 3- or 4-year-old, the better off the child will be coming into public school.

At Goddard, teachers spend time helping kids gain the confidence for basic socialization skills, such as sharing with their class and teaching them to become comfortable speaking in front of an audience or teaching them how to interact with other children.

Lyndel of Spanish Springs has been taking her daughter Ainsley, who turns 3 this week, to Goddard for a year and a half. Lyndel said she and her husband wanted Ainsley to learn social skills while the couple worked.

“As working parents, we’re so stressed and tired after working all day that it’s hard to invest as much time as we should,” Lyndel said.

At Goddard, Ainsley has learned the alphabet, how to count in both English and Spanish and some sign language, along with some yoga. Her vocabulary has improved as a result of attending preschool and she has an increased ability in writing, recognizing shapes and colors and comes home singing songs that her mother doesn’t even know.

How to choose a good preschool for a child is also an important decision for parents.

Agaman said the top two things to take into consideration are staff training and curriculum. Goddard teachers are required to have either an associate’s or bachelor’s degree in early childhood education.

Walsh agreed that parents should consider the quality of the school’s program and staff.

“Research shows that teachers with a formal education, like having a degree specialized in early childhood education, predicts better teaching,” she said. “Ideally, all teachers should have a bachelor’s degree. But a low salary makes it difficult to attract higher quality teachers. (As a former preschool teacher) I know the low salary and high turnout rates; you want teachers to be motivated and want them to enjoy being a teacher.”

Walsh also encourages parents to visit a school to get a sense of its operations and the experiences it offers children.

“The parent should feel good about the school,” Walsh said. “You want to get a feel for the environment. Look at it from a child’s eyes. Is the furniture appropriate? Are there interesting things to do? Are there appropriate assistants to do activities with them and space? What is the most fun thing to do when they’re 4? Is there an outside playground?”

Walsh said the school should be place that encourages learning in everything that engages a child.

“Learning happens in all kinds of situations,” Walsh said. “It’s really the curriculum that’s going to be helping to build the experience (for a child). . . . You want to make sure it follows local licensing and what that basically involves is there are health inspections, adequate space for children, enough faculty for children.”

Agaman said she has noticed that mothers and fathers have different priorities in choosing a preschool.

“For dads, the number one thing is a safe environment,” Agaman said. “Moms, most of the time, look for cleanliness and nurturing.”

While preschool provides an important early jumpstart for children, Walsh said parents should remember that they themselves are their child’s first experience with learning.

“It’s always important to remember that the parent is the child’s first teacher,” Walsh said. “Parental involvement can mean different things and a teacher’s role is to provide the parent with updates to inform them what’s going on with their child in the classroom.

“And the parent should drop by to see how things are going because never again, in most cases, are they going to have the opportunity to drop by and see what’s going on with their child in the classroom,” Walsh added.